Abbasid bookhand

The ‘Abbasid bookhand’ is a generic term for a variety of scripts that originated in the early chancery and that were later used for non-Qur’anic texts. This label was introduced by François Déroche to replace a variety of old appellations such as ‘Kufic naskhī’, ‘Persian Kufic’, ‘Oriental Kufic’, ‘semi-Kufic’, etc. (Déroche et al. 2006: 217). The origins of these scripts are most likely traceable to the first century of Islam and some of them appear to have been influenced by the Syriac sertā script. The → alif in these scripts often looks like a reversed ‘s’ or a club, and can be found with or without a → head-serif. Here one also encounters the → lām alif ligature known later as the lām alif al-warrāqiyah (Déroche 1992: 132).

These scripts came to play an important role in the 3rd/9th century in the copying of texts and the 4/10th century was their golden age. They “are chiefly recognizable by the way they introduce, in varying proportions, sharp angles in features that in naskhī would be handled as curves; this is particularly true of the letter nūn in an isolated or terminal position, as well as the ‘heads’ of letters such as fāʾ, qāf, and mīm” (Déroche et al. 2006: 217). From these

Fig. 1: Detail of Gharib al-ḥadīth by Abū ʿUbayd al-Qāsim ibn Sallām; the oldest dated codex written on paper, executed in 252/866 and preserved in Leiden University (Or.298, f.239b) – see http://www.islamicmanuscripts.info/E-publications/witkam_oldest_dated/index.html
scripts developed → Maghribī. A dressed-up (stylized) version of the Abbasid bookhand is now referred to as the → New Abbasid Style or ‘broken cursive’ (Blair 2006: 144).

Abbreviations and abbreviation symbols*

Abbreviations are usually designated in various Arabic sources as ḍalamāt, rumūz, muṣṭalaḥat (iṣṭilāḥat), and mukhtasarāt. Although two important lists of abbreviations have recently been published, there is as yet no complete study of their usage in the Arabic language, whether in the past or in modern times (AMT, 174–175; AMTS, 103–104; EALL, s.v. “Abbreviations”, I, 1–5; Gacek 2007: 220–221).

Generally speaking, there are four main categories of abbreviations encountered in Arabic texts:

- Suspensions: abbreviation by truncation of the letters at the end of the word, e.g. al-musannif or ta’ālā (see Fig. 2). Perhaps the most interesting example here is the case of suspensions which look like, or were considered by some as numerals. To this category belong signs which resemble the numerals ٢ and ۳, but which may represent the unpointed tāʾ and shīn (for tamām and sharḥ) when used in conjunction with marginal glosses.
- Contractions: abbreviating by means of omitting some letters in the middle of the word, but not the beginning or the ending, e.g. qawluhu.
- Sigla: using one letter to represent the whole word, e.g. matn.
- Abbreviation symbols: symbols in the form of logographs used for whole words. A typical abbreviation symbol is the horizontal stroke (sometimes hooked at the end) which represents the word sanah (‘year’). Another example is the ‘two teeth stroke’ (which looks like two unpointed bāʾs) that represents the word fa’ta’amalhu/hā – ‘reflect on it’), used in manuscripts for notabilia or side-heads.

Closely connected with these abbreviations is the contraction of a group of words into one ‘portemanteau’ word (nahṭ), for instance, basmalah (bi-sm Allāh), ḥamdalah (al-ḥamd li-Llāh) and ṣalwalah (ṣallā Allāh ‘alayhi). For all intents and purposes the word nahṭ corresponds to an acronym, that is, a word formed from the abbreviation of, in most cases, the initial letters of each word in the construct. Most of these constructs are textual and pious formulae. Apart from the above-mentioned basmalah, ḥamdalah and ṣalwalah, we encounter: ṭalbaqah (ṭāla Allāh baqāʾahu), ḥawqalah or ḥawlaqah (lā ḥawla wa-lā quwwata illā bi-Allāh), ṣalʿamah (a synonym of ṣalwalah), ḥasbalah (ḥasabunā Allāh),